

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Evelyn Freeman Roberts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Evelyn Freeman, 1919-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts,
Dates:	March 31, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:21:48).
Abstract:	Bandleader, music composer, and musician Evelyn Freeman Roberts (1919 - 2017) formed the Evelyn Freeman Orchestra and composed music for television shows. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 31, 2006, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_056
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Evelyn Freeman Roberts was born on February 13, 1919, to Gertrude Evelyn Richardson and Ernest Aaron Freeman. Roberts grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and performed music at local social events with "The Freeman Family," a group that included her brother, Ernie, and father. She also began performing locally in a classical ensemble. Roberts skipped school one day to watch Duke Ellington at Cleveland's Palace Theater and met Ellington after the performance. His music made a huge impact on Roberts, who decided at that moment that she wanted to be a bandleader. She was a bright student, and graduated ahead of her grade in 1936.

After auditioning for a scholarship at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Roberts decided to attend the Institute. Although she had less training than many of the students, Roberts had perfect pitch and was a talented sight-reader, and managed to work her way through school performing. Around 1938, she formed her own swing band, and their performances included a Cleveland Institute dance party. Roberts graduated from the Institute of Music in 1941, and as an African American, she saw no openings in classical music, so she began to focus more on her band's work.

Her group, now titled the Evelyn Freeman Swing Band, had begun performing locally, including broadcasts on Cleveland's WHK radio station and performances for the local NBC affiliate. When World War II arrived, a Navy recruiter convinced the group to join the Navy as a whole, which prevented the draft from splitting the ensemble. As a result, they had become the first all-African American Navy band, were stationed near Peru, Indiana and were nicknamed the "Gobs of Swing." Roberts herself was not recruited, although she would be later as an 'honorary member,' but in the meantime she continued performing but with a smaller ensemble, which included such future jazz stars as Ben "Bull Moose" Jackson.

In 1945, after the war ended, Roberts left Cleveland after meeting Thomas S. Roberts, her future husband. Roberts met her husband after he sought her for some musical arrangements, although it took some time before they would become romantically involved. The couple soon moved to New York City, where Roberts received significant

critical accolades for her vocal arrangements for the Wings over Jordan gospel group. She also began working with Vaudeville acts, then began performing in upscale hotels in New York City. In the meantime, much of her band, now discharged from the military, went on to significant success, including members who would go on to perform with Dizzy Gillespie and Lionel Hampton.

The Evelyn Freeman Orchestra would reform in the late 1950s with new members, and released *Let's Make a Little Motion*. In 1960, she released *Sky High*, a new album, and in 1962 released *Didn't It Rain*. In the late 1960s, she moved to California and masterminded a group called The Young Saints, and in 1970, the Young Saints performed for Richard Nixon in the White House. Roberts continued to perform over the years, including a lengthy stint as a composer for television, although she would often remain in the background as an arranger, including work for Bing Crosby, Dean Martin and Louis Prima. She was the co-founder and chief administrator for the Young Saints Scholarship Foundation.

Roberts passed away on June 5, 2017 at age 98.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts was conducted by Paul Brock on March 31, 2006, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Bandleader, music composer, and musician Evelyn Freeman Roberts (1919 - 2017) formed the Evelyn Freeman Orchestra and composed music for television shows.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Roberts, Evelyn Freeman, 1919-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Roberts, Evelyn Freeman, 1919---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Bandleader

Musician

Music Composer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, March 31, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_001, TRT: 0:28:51 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts was born on February 13, 1919 in Cleveland, Ohio to Gertrude Richardson Freeman and Ernest Freeman, Sr. In North Carolina, her maternal great grandmother was purchased as a slave for four hundred dollars when she was eleven years old. By the time she was twelve years old, she was pregnant with her first child. Robert's grandmother was the youngest of eight children fathered by the slaveholder, and was taught to read with her white half-siblings. She married Plummer Alston Richardson, a successful barber who was half Native American and half white. He owned one of only two cars in the state, and people came to Nashville, North Carolina just to see his home's electric lights, which ran on a generator. Together, they raised six children in a large house. Roberts' grandfather hired sharecroppers to grow tobacco, and her grandmother ran a county store, supplying milk and eggs from her farm during World War II rationing. Richards' mother and her siblings all attended boarding school.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_002, TRT: 0:28:42 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts' paternal grandfather chose the name Freeman after emancipation. He walked forty miles to court Roberts' grandmother, a Choctaw Native American. They married and settled in Wilson, North Carolina, where he worked as a brick mason. As a young man, Roberts' father walked to Alabama to enroll at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. He was impressed with Cleveland, Ohio when he traveled there with the school band. Upon graduating, he worked in a post office in Atlanta, Georgia. He eventually met Roberts' mother at a church picnic in North Carolina, while she was home from Cheyney Training School for Teachers. Robert's parents married in Ohio, and her mother settled in Cleveland rather than complete her degree. During World War I, Robert's father played in the U.S. Army band in France, and she was born before his return. Her father played music in ballrooms until a lack of demand forced him to work at a foundry, where he was made foreman. Roberts grew up with two younger brothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_003, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts watched her father play flute at Sunday school and with the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks band. Already literate, she skipped first grade at Cleveland's John Burroughs Elementary School. Roberts read all the books in the local library before she turned twelve years old. She played music with her brother and learned that she had perfect pitch. Roberts struggled with math and speech, but surprised her teacher with her high score on an intelligence test. She learned Latin and French in gifted classes

at Central High School, which became majority black during her time there. Roberts received a scholarship from Cleveland Institute of Music, and worked for department heads to pay the rest of her tuition. She graduated in 1941. Her brothers also attended the institute. Ernest Freeman, Jr. was inducted into the U.S. Navy before he could finish his degree, and Arthur Freeman opted to study music after he was barred from studying engineering in high school.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_004, TRT: 0:28:31 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts played classical music at Sunday teas with her father and her brother. Her brother's friends joined the ensemble, and they began playing church concerts. When she was sixteen, she met Duke Ellington at a performance and was inspired by his music. When her brother found their father's saxophone in 1938, he and Roberts started the Evelyn Freeman Swing Band. The group was featured on WTAM Radio, and a U.S. Navy recruiter offered the group a position as a Navy band. They became the first all-black Navy band in history, but Roberts was left behind. She continued putting on shows in Cleveland with a six-piece band and worked with Bull Moose Jackson and Benny Bailey. Roberts met her husband when he asked her to arrange his songs, and he found her a job arranging for the Wings Over Jordan Choir. They fell in love on the road, and when she was let go in 1946, the couple moved to New York City. There, they arranged for vaudeville acts and at hotels like The Pierre and Waldorf Astoria New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_005, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts met her first husband, Lloyd Gentry, while working at Cleveland's Playhouse Settlement, later known as Karamu House. His first wife was Minnie Gentry, the grandmother of Terrence Howard. Roberts and Gentry had three children, and after her divorce, Roberts left them in foster care while she toured with the Wings Over Jordan Choir. In 1948, she and her second husband bought a home in New York City, had a daughter, and brought Roberts' first three children to live with them. Her family accompanied her husband on tour with Sy Oliver. The children learned to sing and dance, and soon had their own act on the Borscht circuit. In 1956, the family moved to Los Angeles, California. Roberts entered the recording industry, where she was often the only African American and woman in the studio. Discrimination was prevalent in Hollywood, so she often performed in Las Vegas, Nevada. When Roberts released the album 'Didn't it Rain,' she earned a featured spot on Peggy Lee's television show.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_006, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts worked with singers like Eddie Albert and Frankie Laine. She released 'Didn't it Rain' with Evelyn Freeman and the Exciting Voices, which gained some notoriety. Roberts also wrote a production with Louis Prima in 1961. She and her husband began training young people and established a group called the Young Saints. They performed at the Calvary United Methodist Church and stocked the orchestra with star musicians. They also played a benefit concert for Leon Sullivan's Opportunities Industrialization Centers, where they were discovered by Lena Horne's agent and signed by Ashley-Famous. From there, the Young Saints were featured on 'The Danny Kaye Show,' 'The Jonathan Winters Show' and 'The Andy Griffith Show.' In 1972, Roberts' husband rented a warehouse, where they taught performance and telecommunications as part of the Model Cities program. Roberts and her

husband ran the program until 2005, when their granddaughter, Laura Ellis, became its new director.

Video Oral History Interview with Evelyn Freeman Roberts, Section A2006_056_001_007, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

Evelyn Freeman Roberts served as the Young Saints' musical director and arranged the music for all their programs. She ran the organization with her husband until his death in 1999. Their daughter, Lisa Roberts, was one of the top five hundred singers in the country, until a brain tumor took 80 percent of her sight and she gave up professional singing. Roberts recalls the Young Saints' performance at the White House. The children traveled by bus, stopping in Cleveland, Ohio to perform at Antioch Baptist Church. They spent three days in the White House, and performed for President Richard Milhous Nixon, the first lady, Vice President Spiro Agnew and his wife, as well as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Roberts continued running the Young Saints program until 2005, when her granddaughter, Laura Ellis, took over the operation. Roberts reflects upon her career, and hopes to be remembered as a humanist and educator. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.